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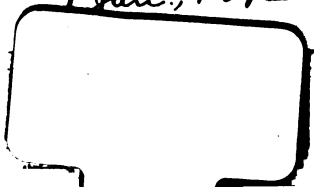


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# THE INDEX TRACTS.

No. 13.

## On the Vision of Heaven.

BY

PROF. FRANCIS W. NEWMAN.

From THE INDEX of September 14, 1872.

TOLEDO, OHIO:  
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# ON THE VISION OF HEAVEN.

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BY PROFESSOR FRANCIS W. NEWMAN.

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In the present state of philosophy and science, of belief and unbelief, it is not at all easy to learn what is the conception, the scene, the pictorial view concerning a future state of existence, which any particular Christian, whose professed creed we know, practically and really entertains; but we can hardly mistake, in a broad and historical view, the outlines of thought and imagination which have prevailed. As certain rude tribes have believed in a world where hunting ground is plentiful and full of game, and the hunter has no lack of dog or horse; as Moslems have pictured to themselves a Paradise peopled with black-eyed and beautiful nymphs; as the intelligent Greek (with less vivid and constant assurance indeed) believed their chief heroes and wise men to dwell in certain isles of the ocean, rid of human cares and quarrels, but free for martial sport and majestic dance, for converse with sages, or listening to music, song and science,—even so surely have Christians for near eighteen hundred years prevalently upheld certain definite conceptions of a future world, on which we can speak in some detail. It is not necessary to dwell on that detestable side of the question, the “Tartarus” which they derived from Greeks and Romans, if not rather from an Egyptian or Asiatic fountain, and certainly did not improve. The hell of Virgil was a mere pur-



gatory, an infliction salutary and restorative; by which "ingrained wickedness was washed out or burned out." Christians also admitted this idea, but coupled it with a far more horrible alternative, which numbers of Protestants, happily, are now resolutely disowning. But I pass to the Christian ideal of *heaven*. It is built primarily on the assumption that the worship in the church is a type of the celestial world. Dr. Watts' hymn puts into the mouth of a good child the correlative comparison of the church-worship to heaven:

"I have been there [*to church*], and still will go;  
 'Tis like a little heaven below."

God Almighty sits aloft, listening to his own praises from the mouth of his angels and saints, who (as the Apocalypse expresses it) have no rest day or night, but harp and sing forever. But besides the hymn to the thrice holy Lord God Almighty, a second object calls for praise,—the Lamb, who is in the midst of the throne of God. Here is an eminently new conception, and one characteristically Christian. Jesus, now glorified as the Lamb, is the ideal of pure, saintly, affectionate manhood, who, though no longer flesh, yet retains human features and human voice, so that his redeemed can read his sentiments in the play of his countenance, as well as receive instruction from his words. He is believed to love every saint, and to have loved him before the foundation of the world, with a love that surpasses the human not in intensity only, but also in wisdom and purity; having accepted them from his Father as the reward of his labors, and having therewith undertaken the task of *training them to perfect holiness*.

This is the cardinal point of the high Christian thought. Sin is the saint's daily vexation, worse by far than suffering, while suffering, in whatever form, is most harassing as the occasion of sin. The great mass of men and women, in subordinate stations and having to sustain life by labor, are liable to frets from wrong or insult, ordinarily petty but sometimes severe, besides trials various in kind and countless in number from the calamities or misconduct of those either near and dear, or assuming to be near, when not dear. Each

Christian subjected to the wear and tear of constant struggle, and trying to maintain gentleness and dignity, sweetness of spirit and serenity, thankfulness to God and love to man, is daily made conscious of a sad falling below his sincere efforts, and sighs out perpetually—"Oh for more grace!" Neither more prosperity nor more celebrity nor more ease nor more freedom (however highly such things may be valued) is the burden of his heart's cry to God, but more "grace." Such is the conventional phrase for more moral ability to bear the unreasonableness or cruelty of man and the casualties of life, as God and one's conscience would have us bear them. Hence the primary idea of heaven is a place and state of *rest from sin and suffering*; a place where we shall not be agonized by the sight of woes which we are unable to relieve, nor stung in conscience for possible selfishness when we turn away from them in despair; a place where no tyranny frets us into unamiable retaliation, no want goads us into unworthy compliance or cowardly silence, for a righteous rule is universal. The Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in his wings. There our hungering and thirsting after righteousness shall be fully appeased; for the Lamb himself, the centre of God's grace and goodness, shall lead us to living fountains. Neither sin nor the occasion of sin shall remain, but holiness shall be perfected in all. No sin of others shall afflict us, no sin of our own shall separate us from communion with God; but Peace, the fruit of righteousness, shall make our union with the Almighty Source of Holiness constant, conscious and fertile in unutterable joy.

Let me for a moment contrast this Christian anticipation of heaven with the ideal future state which Cicero puts forward in the first book of his very elaborate Tusculan Disputations: and Cicero, on many very solid grounds, deserves high honor in the historical chain of European moralists. From his other writings we know that he was unable to maintain any fixed belief concerning future existence, and, as he puts his thoughts into the mouths of others, these cannot in any case be quoted as his convictions; yet it is evi-

dent that he is trying to elevate the conception, and put forth a worthy ideal. He professes inability to receive the gross opinion that the soul is the blood or the heart or any of the vitals, and he cannot understand what is meant by saying that it is the harmony of the physical actions, which seems to be only a metaphor: he believes it to have a substantive existence, but to be very subtle; at least as subtle as inflamed air. Hence, when released from the body by death, it rises aloft through the atmosphere until it reaches a stratum of its own density. There it rests, and feeds on the same ethereal food which supports the life of the stars; and delights itself perpetually with intellectual contemplation. (I have not Cicero's works within reach, and must quote from memory; but I think that he names three sciences as his ideal of contemplation.)

The action on the mind produced by any vision by no means wholly depends on the scene being believed to be real. The nature of the scene itself may greatly impress us for good or evil. How delicious, how much coveted, is the view from our windows of some beautiful distant landscape, some lake, some bay of the sea shut in by hills, some horizon on which the colors of sunset may be seen! How pleasant to see the blue sky; how impressive, awe-striking and calming is a clear view of the stars by night! Whether there is any personal relation between us and these distant scenes, is quite a secondary question. The sight of a nook of lofty mountain, —say, of some craggy region embosomed by snow—is not the less delightful because we are never to inhabit it, nor because we should shudder to ascend to it. We are often aware that the beauty would be greatly impaired by nearness. The picture landscape on our walls does not the less soothe the spirit and perhaps exhilarate us, though we happen to know that it is a fancy composition of the artist, with no true original. So, too, when we see in the clouds magnificent structures, silver and purple domes, and mountainous forms, it is true that we should admire them still more if we supposed them to endure perpetually in their present aspect; yet their

tendency to calm, cheer and steady the mind is not destroyed by our knowledge of their evanescence.

When we consider all these phenomena, it becomes clear that, in proportion as the imagination of any people dwells upon the vision of a future state, it will be affected for good or evil by the nature of the scene contemplated, and that, out of proportion to the fixed certainty of belief. Hence, if an ancient Greek imagined that the prowess of an Achilles, however selfish, proud, vindictive and cruel, entitled him to a place in the Islands of the Blessed—though the belief were poetical and unsteady—it might give baneful impulse (as it is said to have done) to the warlike ambition of an Alexander. If it be true that the Mohammedan, in proportion to the fervor of his faith, regards the company of black-eyed damsels to be the chief enjoyment of Paradise, and death in battle against infidels to be a sure title of admission to Paradise; then such a vision of the future must have a sensual and ferocious tendency.

Now the peculiarity of the Christian vision (of course, I mean, excluding hell) is, that it has no form nor comeliness to the worldly mind, the fierce or hard heart, the meanly ambitious, nor to any who are absorbed in self and contented in sin. Many a scoffer (long before my excellent friend, M. D. Conway, was born) has said of it:—"It is tiresome enough to sing long hymns at church; I should not at all like to be harping and trumpeting day and night on a cloud." No doubt the idea is puerile: church ordinances cannot be made the whole of a life without utter moral ruin, nor can they reasonably and wisely become the sole ideal of a future scene. But no Christian really makes them such. The scoffer does *not* go on to confess, yet it is none the less true, that he has no pleasure in anticipating a land of universal holiness, where every eye looks up with love and joy to the guiding countenance of a righteous Lord. It needs a heart essentially in love with holiness, whatever its sins from bursts of uncontrolled passion, to make the Christian heaven seem desirable; and even if, as

Virgil says of Æneas, one "feed the heart on a vain picture," the nature of the picture is here such as to improve the heart which feeds on it. Those who have never been Christians in a spiritual sense, perhaps ill understand how it combines unselfishness with a sense of the communion of saints and union with God in Christ. A young Christian who, perhaps for the first time, receives the "Lord's Supper" in what he supposes to be a choice collection of saintly communicants from the hands of a peculiarly saintly minister, has an inexpressible delight by mere presence in so select an assembly. No one of them knows him; he does not desire to be known; he seeks no introductions; but he feels that everything around him is sacred. No profane heart mars his conscious sympathy with those whom he believes to be in close spiritual union with the Almighty and the thrice Holy. A thrilling sense of joy which may mount into transport suggests to him what will be the blessedness of that state where all hearts are in harmony with God, and thereby with one another. To impute as *selfishness* the desire that such a "kingdom of God" may "come,"—the desire to see its realization—is surely a very great mistake. The desire was plainly uttered, long before the Christian Era, in the Hebrew Psalms:—"Remember me, O Lord, with the favor that thou bearest unto thy people: O visit me with thy salvation; that I may see the felicity of the chosen ones and rejoice in the gladness of thy heritage."

There is here no vulgar notion of thrones and crowns and sitting on an upper seat, which, scattered here and there in the New Testament, damages the doctrine, and does but gratify ambition; there is no exaltation of self; but, as a mother desires to see the happiness and honor of her son, most unselfishly, so does the spiritual Christian aspire to see the reign of righteousness and holiness triumphant. Faith in such a Paradise, *just in proportion as it can be sustained*, seems to me undeniably sanctifying and ennobling.

One of the compensating advantages which the rude in mind have over the cultivated and

logical is that, where a belief has moral excellence combined with logical weakness, the rudeminded can appropriate and retain the moral good, unaware of the intellectual difficulties. The intellectual man often earns clearness and definiteness of thought at the expense of warmth, and, if this is inevitable, the price must be paid. It is a first principle of genuine faith that falsehood and error are not so good as truth, however edifying they may seem. As beautiful *visions*, they may have an ennobling tendency; yet, if they be confidently accepted as *true*, while they are *not* true, the falsehood is sure to propagate evil. I am inclined to believe that many Christians who are still in their own consciousness true believers in this heaven, yet, as they grow older and more thoughtful, and seek to realize more definitely the glorious picture of that which is to be, by their very effort to possess their minds with it, dissipate it as a gorgeous mist. It occurs to them to ask:—"Will the Lamb, with whom we are to walk in the Paradise of God, be, like Jesus of Nazareth, of the size of a man? How, then, can the myriad millions of the redeemed be in local nearness to him? Or if he is to be, like the sun in the heavens, a vast, distant and brilliant object, what would his human features avail us? After all, is it not a materializing of Deity to ascribe to it the form of man? Is not faith, in its very essence, higher than sight,—the one being spiritual and characteristic of the holy, the other external and common to the spiritual and unspiritual? If we must maintain this now, is it not eternally true? Must we not then accept as *metaphor* only all about the Lamb on Mount Zion, equally as the jewelled city of New Jerusalem, as lofty as it is broad and wide,—the cubical city, of which the same Apocalypse talks?" By such doubts and queries the simple and hearty faith of youth is undermined in maturer age.

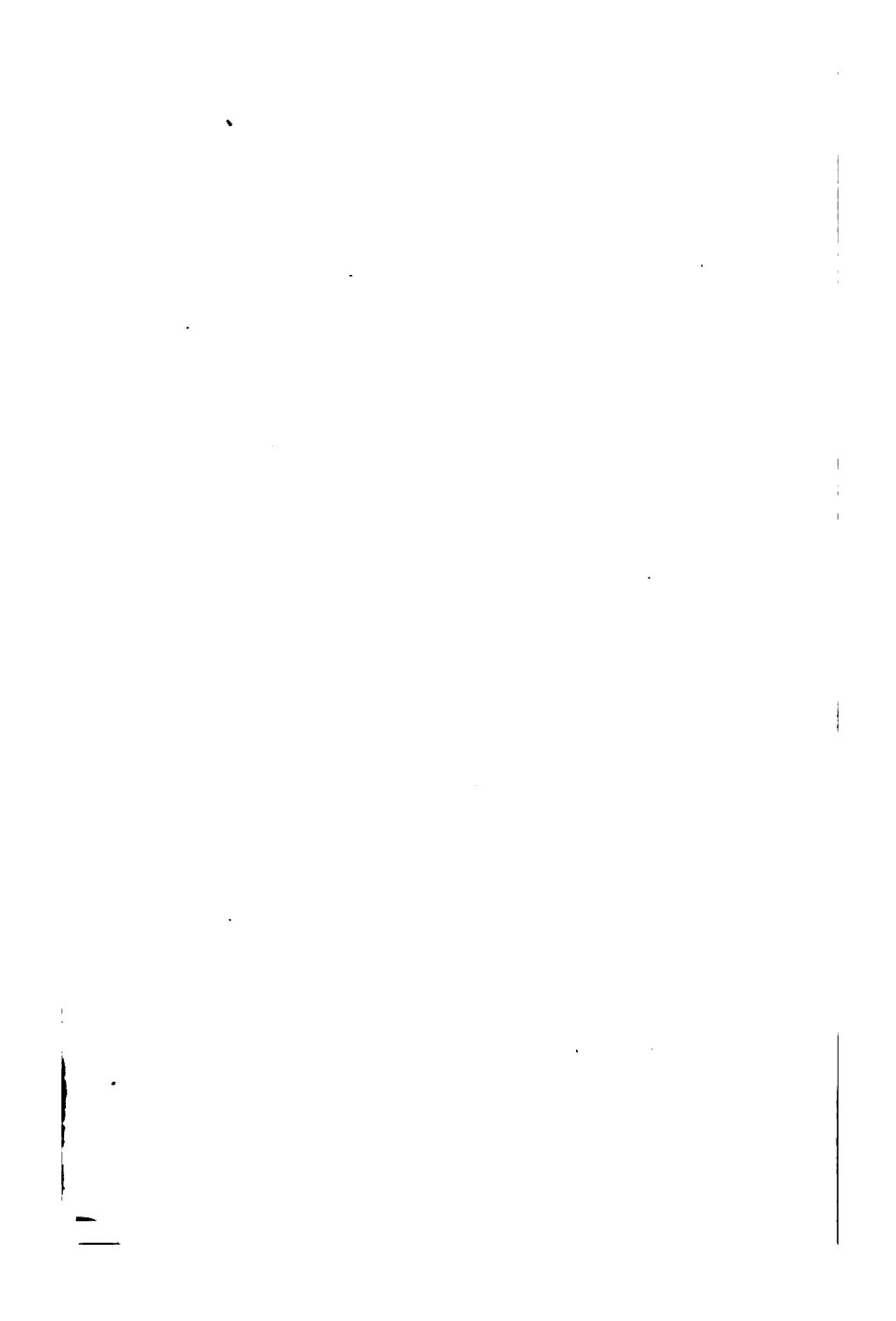
When we look at the subject in the free light of unbiassed inquiry, it is obvious to add that such a being as man can have no room for holiness in a world which has no room for action. Intellect, affection, action, sympathy, make up

that morality of which holiness is the tender glorification. While the heaven of Cicero was all intellect, the heaven of the American Indian all action, the heaven of historical Christianity is all devout sentiment. But no one of these separately can be the true heaven. A careless reader of this paper might suppose that the writer is recommending the Christian belief concerning heaven to be absolute truth; but on the contrary it seems to him that at the utmost it can only be a fragment of truth, inasmuch as it is one-sided,—to waive all other objections and questions hard to answer. Action must have an object: it implies unsatisfied desire, wants that are felt. It may reasonably be doubted whether a total absence of pain, an impossibility of suffering, is compatible—we need not urge, with a frame susceptible of pleasure from without, but—with care for others, and with sympathy. The idea that pain is totally excluded from heaven assumes that pain in itself, and in whatever degree, is an essential evil; which certainly casts censure upon the Creator of this world, and is in many ways refuted by moral considerations. When pain conduces to moral advancement, it must be accounted a good; and it does most visibly exercise and cement affection, and excite gratitude and love so eminently as to suggest that, if the higher moral attachments of one finite being to another are to exist in heaven, occasional *pain* and want and feebleness cannot be excluded. Nay, we may go further, and doubt most seriously whether, in a modified and milder sense, *sin* is not essential to the finite being. The writer of the book of Job says boldly—"God putteth no trust in his servants, and his angels he chargeth with folly." So John in the Apocalypse makes the heavenly host say to the most High—"Thou only art Holy." For to moral perfection, in its absolute sense, perfect knowledge and wisdom of judgment, and an all-powerful will, seem to be essentially prerequisite. Man's virtue, as known to us, is progressive; and to imagine that by death the human being can leap into absolute divine perfection, is certainly very unpalatable. Higher and higher progress is all that can be rea-

sonably hoped for; and progress implies that the present state is imperfect. Only, imperfection needs not to be *degradation*, as in the case of a young man who falls below the virtue which may be reasonably expected of him; it may be comparable rather to the errors and weakness of a good child, who is as wise and virtuous as his years will allow.

For these reasons I do not think that the most spiritual idea of heaven which is strictly Christian can justify itself to sober thought, nor can be long maintained in energy by thoughtful Christians: but those who wish to refute it must first do it justice.





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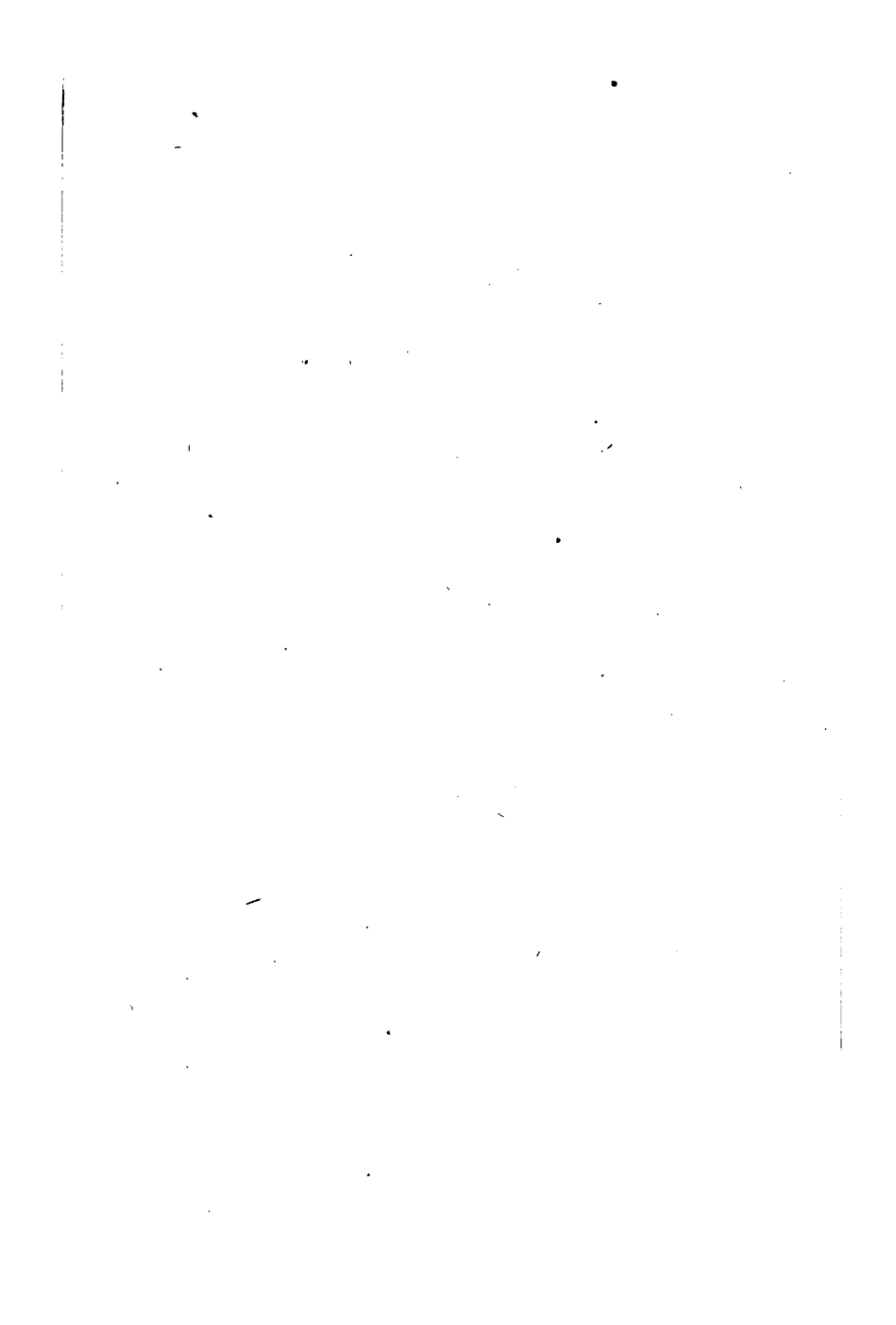
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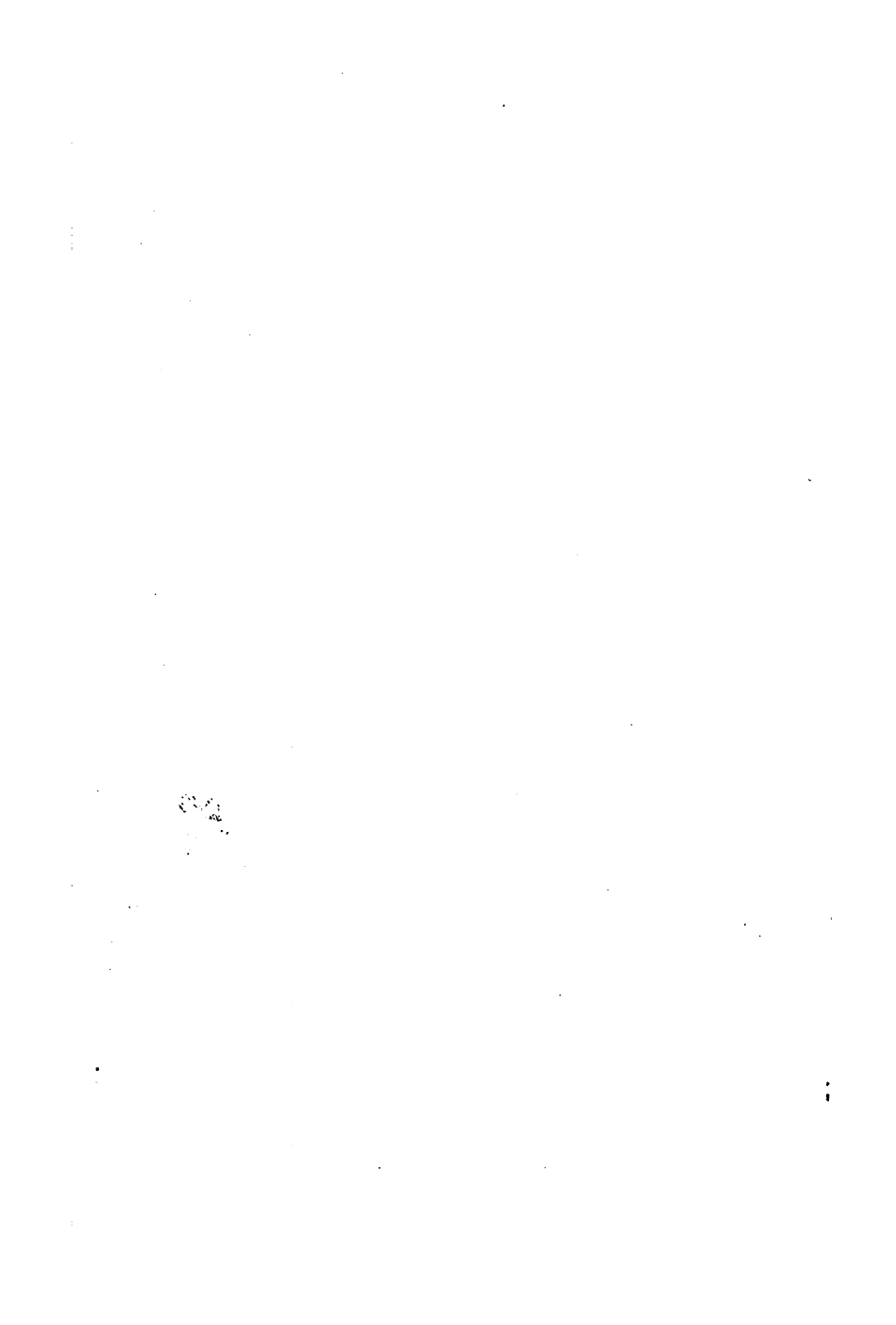
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